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ABSTRACT

The problem with various versions of Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) that have emerged since the turn of the century is that they are not self sustaining--they seemed unable to overcome the destructive forces of departmentalization and the entrenched attitudes in the university both toward writing and toward interdepartmental programs. If WAC in some form is to survive, its advocates must look for allies within their institutions, and they must increase their research output on WAC. At the University of Oklahoma, for example, writing across the curriculum--along with collaborative learning, critical reading, critical thinking and other activities that contribute to literacy--are a required part of the workshops run for all new teaching assistants on campus. All new faculty attend a series of luncheon workshops throughout the first semester that deal with writing to learn, critical reading, and collaboration. A small group of faculty has been meeting to form a center on improving teaching and learning across campus, staffed with people from a variety of disciplines. These faculty members believe a center of learning and teaching that is interdisciplinary can insure the life of better teaching practices on campus. But such a belief in WAC is only a beginning, a point of departure to a larger kind of literacy. WAC's possibility of survival will have an even better chance if long-range systematic research is begun to find out just what happens when people use writing to learn in other disciplines. (RS)

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WAC: A Point of Departure to Full Literacy

The problem with the various versions of Writing Across the Curriculum that have emerged since the turn of the century is that they are not self sustaining. They are born, have a vigorous brief life and die. As David Russell has documented they seemed unable to overcome the destructive forces of departmentalization and "the entrenched attitudes in the university both toward writing and toward interdepartmental programs" ("Writing across the Curriculum and the Communications Movement: Some Lessons from the Past," CCC, May 1987). These problems are fundamental, for underlying them is the notion that undergraduate teaching is not very important, and that research is the important activity, and creating more professionals to do research runs a close second (Russell 191).

If, as the old saying goes, we need to learn from history so that we don't repeat the mistakes of past, then what is it that the history of Writing Across the Curriculum has to teach us? Russell gives three possible answers to the question. First, he says WAC must be institutionalized just as writing centers, language labs, affirmative action offices and women's studies programs have been. Second, WAC needs "large amounts" of funding in order "to purchase faculty time dedicated exclusively to WAC and to guarantee reasonable class sizes..." Third, people need to stop expecting WAC to become permanent in a semester or a year. As Russell says, "WAC programs require patience." In other words, changing established systems takes time (191). Departmentalized and institutionalized faculty and administrators who have come to see the structures they live in as natural and comfortable are not likely to take to innovations, "new" focuses, and interdisciplinary, cross-curricular activities readily. They are not likely to lavish money on upstarts who questions the naturalness of things and thereby cause institutional discomfort.

I suspect that Russell is right about what is needed if today's WAC program are not to slide into the archival dungeons of their predecessors. But I believe his call may go unheeded unless advocates of WAC do more than promote their own self-interest. As I have noted elsewhere WAC proponents often fall into the very behavior they denigrate others for. They often accuse university communities of being insular, and that, they say, is why WAC programs are hard to establish. But it takes little examination of reports on WAC programs to see clearly that the writing establishment is frequently narrow in its focus on ways to improve learning-often it is implied that writing is the only answer. Such insularity, even when unintentional (as is usually the case), will doom efforts to institutionalize WAC (see "WAC and Literacy...," M/MLA 1988, St. Louis).

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I think Russell's recommendations are good ones, but I would urge proponents of WAC to view writing as one part of a larger movement to foster learning and thoughtfulness. Writing not only helps us learn and clarify what we know, but it helps us to be more thoughtful. But so do careful reading, oral communication, collaborative learning and critical reasoning or thinking. Most efforts to improve teaching and learning in colleges and universities have as their goal to make teachers more aware of how people learn. Such efforts are designed to help teachers become more knowledgeable and more thoughtful in order to increase student learning, knowledge and thoughtfulness. So perhaps proponents of WAC programs need to look to a larger conception of learning that the refocus on literacy allows. Then they could join with others who see improving learning as central to their mission, whether these people focus on collaboration, reading, critical thinking, oral communication or any other of the ways designed to change or modify the lecture model that dominates campuses across the country.

If WAC in some form is to survive, not only must its advocates attempt to do what Russell suggests, but they must also look for allies within their institutions, and they must increase their research output on WAC. No easy formula for forming alliances can be given here because of the variety of structures within institutions around the country, but with a little effort allies can probably be found everywhere. Thousands of institutions have writing centers or labs; many have reading and study skill centers; teaching improvement and instructional improvement offices operate at a large number of institutions. Special programs exist for honors students, various ethnic groups, working adults, returning professionals and so forth. Also spread around universities and colleges are people who are working on problems of special interest to them or who are dedicated to improving teaching in their discipline.

At the University of Oklahoma, for example, writing across the curriculum along with collaborative learning, critical reading, critical thinking and other activities that contribute to literacy are a required part of the workshops run for all new Teaching Assistants on campus. For the second year all new faculty attend a series of luncheon workshops throughout the first semester that deal with writing to learn and critical reading and collaboration and so forth. In addition, the College of Liberal Studies has built into all of its courses the same components and activities that contribute to the independence that comes with true literacy. The Writing Center which is institutionalized also works on the same problems that face others concerned about teaching and learning. The Director of the Writing Center reports to and works closely with a committee comprised of the English Department chair, the Director of Freshman Composition who is also the Director of Technical Writing, and the Director of Composition who has worked on both short-term WAC efforts and long-term literacy efforts across the

entire campus. The Writing Center Director and his staff now run workshops for faculty and students in all disciplines on writing as a way of learning. In addition, the Honors Program has instituted a number of pre-freshman seminars offered a little over a week before school begins. In these three-member, team-taught seminars a composition person versed in collaboration, critical reading and critical thinking works with a person from a variety of disciplines (e.g. Art History, biology, History, etc.) and a person from library science. Faculty are paid by the Honors Program.

The goals of people interested in WAC at OU were not to become expert advisers to other departments or to build a WAC empire, but instead to find allies and to create approaches that would insure the life of WAC and other learning activities on the campus. At last year's M/MLA meeting I reported on a Ford Foundation project that had been running for a year called "The Empowerments of Literacy." Another year of the project has gone by, and after a brief sketch of what I said last year I will report on what happened this year. In phase one of the project two teams of three faculty members coordinated some of their course material and teaching in history, political science and composition. Students enrolled in one course were enrolled in the other two. In phase two five of these teachers worked with a group of thirty other faculty members in a series of half-day workshops discussing their successes and failures and helping the group focus on activities that enhance literacy. In phase three most of these thirty faculty incorporated the ideas from the workshops into their courses and many were observed using the components that contribute to literacy.

After these three phases it was decided that, if a better understanding of the components of literacy empowers faculty and they in turn use their knowledge to empower students, then these faculty members should work with other faculty members to help empower them. The original "experts" were no longer needed. So this spring fifteen of these faculty members (many in teams of two) worked with thirty-one new faculty members on various components of literacy. Nine teams of five (one of six) faculty members met for at least an hour several times during the spring semester (1989) to discuss issues of concern to them. I met with each team at its last meeting and simply took notes on the meeting so I could report to the Ford Foundation in our final report. In many of the groups people were discussing approaches that they had tried out; in others they were energetically arguing about the value of various approaches; in still others they were discussing readings they had done. In all I saw faculty deeply involved in the issues of literacy, learning and teaching.

As I said earlier I think we need to seek allies, if we are to insure that WAC along with critical reading, collaboration and critical thinking do not become other casualties to institutional inertia. From the Ford Foundation program I believe we worked with

and found at least fifty new allies. But even with the success we have had in getting writing, critical reading, collaboration, critical thinking and oral communication woven into the fabric of our university, I believe we still must do much more, if our work is not to meet the fate of WAC programs of the past. We need to continue working with everyone who has anything to do with training graduate students to teach in their department; that is investing in the future. But we also need some kind of center that will keep alliances alive and that will help create new alliances--a center of learning, teaching, interdisciplinary cooperation that focuses on cross-curricular learning activities that include all the components of literacy.

At the University of Oklahoma a small group of faculty has been meeting to form a center on improving teaching and learning across campus, staffed with people from a variety of discipline. The center would not only promote a variety of teaching and learning activities which would include using writing to learn, but it would insure that each instructional foray would be accompanied by research that would indicate the usefulness of the endeavor--more about the research component later. The people involved in this initial group are from mathematics, marketing (business), instructional services, liberal studies and composition. The person in mathematics is especially interested in math literacy and views using writing, collaboration, focused reading and critical thinking as essential to his goals. He also conducts research on these activities. The person from marketing has done years of research on collaborative learning in business. The instructional services person teaches geography and not only uses activities that enhance literacy in his geography classes, but is responsible for getting ideas on better teaching into the hands of faculty across campus. The Liberal Studies person is the Dean of that college and has been instrumental in getting writing, collaboration and so forth into the seminars that liberal studies students take. The composition person (the author) trains new graduate teaching assistants in English, runs workshops on writing across campus, along with a number of other activities that focus on learning and teaching and conducts research on composition with a special interest in the effect of WAC in other disciplines.

These faculty members believe a center of learning and teaching that is interdisciplinary can insure the life of better teaching practices on campus. The center needs funding, and that is the stage we are engaged in. The center would promote better teaching and learning practices; it would buy faculty time to teach and do research; it would help plan research to accompany all activities it sponsored. In other words, it would begin systematically exploring the value of various practices promoted to improve teaching and learning in the realistic setting of a large university. The research component is essential. WAC proponents and other enthusiasts have complained that other faculty in other

disciplines seem unwilling to embrace their ideas. I don't think they should be surprised. Lots of people make claims based simply on experience or some bright "new" ideas. I have heard claims similar to WAC's made about grammar teaching, cultural literacy, a theme a week, use of models, memorization, and on and on. I, too, like those not in composition who are not quick to embrace WAC, am skeptical of such claims. I don't dismiss them out-of-hand, but I would like more evidence than the word of an enthusiast. The grammar-writing connection over the years has been dealt a severe blow by research evidence, and that evidence speaks louder to me than the claims of faith made by those who still drill their students in grammar.

I think WAC proponents need to start doing more research on the effects of writing in other disciplines. A number of people at Oklahoma have begun such research as a part of a first ten-year plan to study composition in our institution. One graduate student just completed a thesis in which he studied the effects of a modified WAC program on students in a large American History class. Another student is completing her thesis on using an inquiry approach to help students prepare for essay exams. Both studies report significant results, but follow-up research needs to be done. This semester I am working with people in the School of Accounting to examine several approaches to using writing assignments to enhance learning and writing ability. Twenty classes of students have been randomly assigned three treatments, plus a control. Treatment One simply is given six required writing assignments over the semester. Treatment Two does the same assignments, but then students meet in groups of three to read and discuss their papers and revise, if necessary. Treatment Three does the same as Treatment Two but each student is given a revision guide which helps focus the group discussion. Students in the third treatment are required to meet and write their responses and evaluations on the revision guides, for each paper, including their own. The guides, the first draft and all subsequent drafts are turned in. After this initial research the School of Accounting will explore ways to incorporate writing, along with collaboration, critical thinking, and so forth, into their program. Such changes will take time, and for them to continue evidence of their worth will have to be compiled. Research is essential, if we are to convince others and if we are to have a long-range impact on teaching and learning in the university. Obviously writing, along with other activities that contribute to literacy, needs to be studied in a variety of contexts within schools and universities. A center that focuses on learning and teaching and makes research an indispensable part of all its operations should help indicate to skeptics that writing does indeed improve learning. Such evidence will prove more useful than all the present enthusiasm.

Finally, I do believe that writing can foster learning in other disciplines. I also believe that close, guided reading can do the same. The same I believe is true about collaborative learning and oral communication and problem solving which involves critical inquiry. But belief is not enough. I think research evidence can

help bolster confidence in beliefs. Evidence can make us stronger believers. Most WAC proponents believe deeply and are committed, and I think most people admire that. But I think such belief in WAC is a beginning, a point of departure to a larger kind of literacy that is possible. And WAC's possibility of survival will increase, if WAC proponents join with others who are interested in improving teaching and learning in our colleges and universities. This survival will have even a better chance, if we begin long-range systematic research to find out just what happens when people use writing to learn in other disciplines.